

A visit by Linda Deutsch to Cuba - just after death of Fidel Castro



By LINDA DEUTSCH

I was in the midst of preparing for my first real vacation since retiring from the AP when it became clear that the news, as usual, was following me. And for a time it looked like that news might impede my long planned trip to Cuba. It was the night of Nov. 25 and as I checked into Facebook I saw a shocking bulletin. Fidel Castro had just died.

I knew this was history and I knew it would likely have an impact on our trip. I immediately sent a message to our tour organizer in New York. He was on top of it and said he'd get back to us. Our group of 23 members of the California Jazz Foundation was due to meet in Miami on Nov. 30 and arrive in Cuba on Dec. 1 for an eight-day visit, much of it focused on music and dance. But as I read the reports about the period of mourning for Fidel I saw that no music would be allowed until Dec. 5, the day after his funeral. It also became uncertain whether our hotel, the magnificent Hotel Nacional, would be taken over by visiting dignitaries. In the end, it was not. The only dignitary I encountered was Jesse Jackson. But we did not get confirmation that we were going until the night before our flights. Our tour operators worked magic and when the hotel jacked up prices, they picked up the cost.

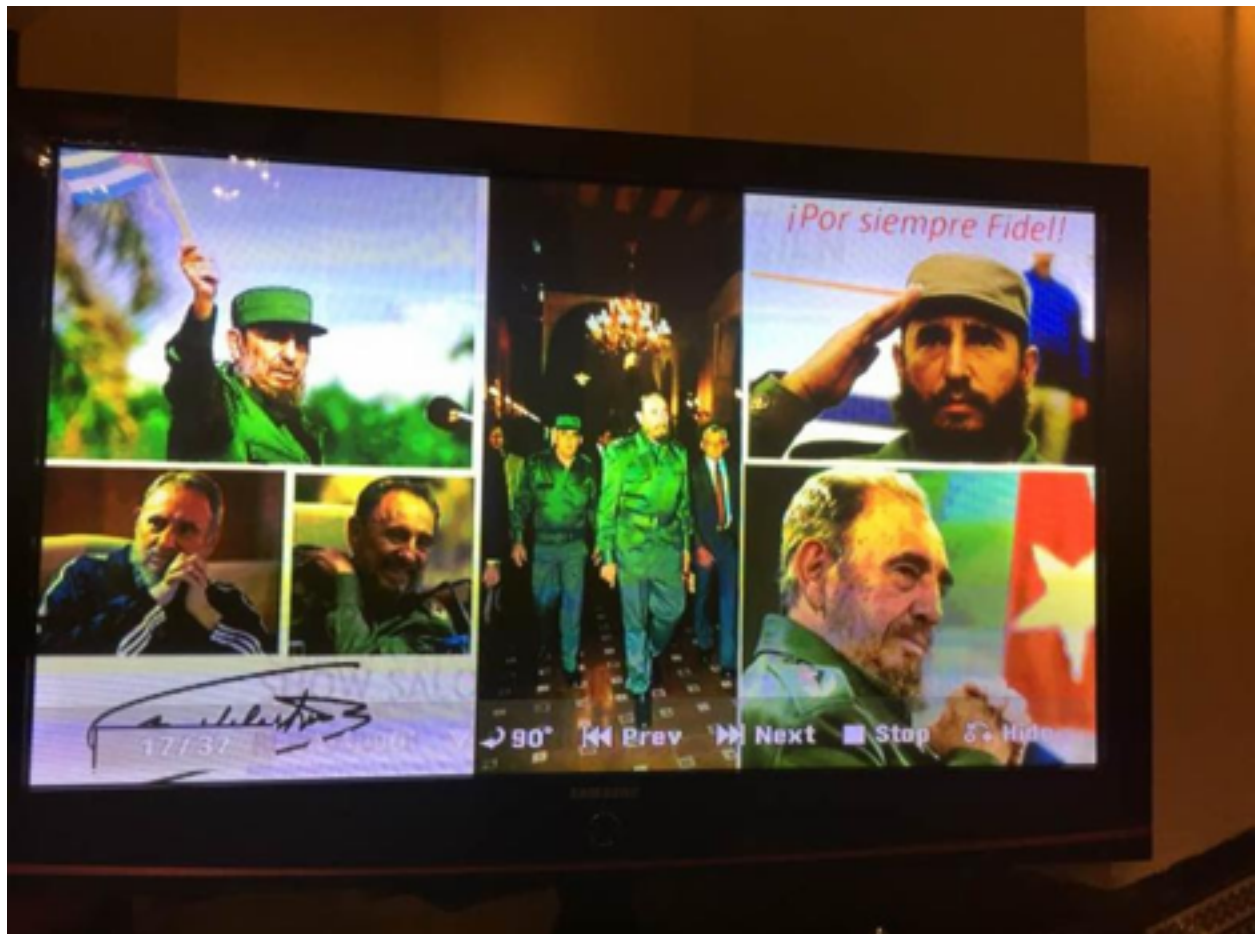
With that prelude, we were grateful to arrive in Havana via charter jet on an overcast morning. Coming from bustling Miami International Airport, it was a shock to land at a small 1950s style airport with only one other plane on the tarmac. There was absolute silence, no air traffic

overhead. It took us 50 minutes to get there from Miami, but we were now a world away. Luggage had to be scanned by hand, a process that took over two hours.

And then our adventure began. When I think back on the week, I see it in pictures - first the ride from the airport past crumbling buildings into Havana with its deteriorating high rises and art deco buildings left from pre-revolutionary days. Then a stop at Revolution Square which a day before had been jammed with thousands of mourners paying tribute to Fidel, who is always referred to by his first name. Now it was empty except for a few tour buses including ours and a technicolor array of American vintage cars refurbished in candy colors and available for taxi rides. They have become a symbol of Havana, lovingly restored by owners who have to either make parts or get Russian parts to keep them going.



Cuban journalist Martin Hacthoun and his wife Sonia with Linda Deutsch. He is longtime correspondent for La Prensa news service and she does radio reports.



The American embargo is an ever present subject. The lack of building supplies, paint and concrete are mentioned along with the lack of imported food, clothing and electronics. At the airport we saw returning residents carrying computers and TV sets they had bought in Miami. They would be taxed heavily to bring them in.

Our hotel, a jewel of pre-revolutionary Cuba, was a favorite of mobsters including Lucky Luciano who had a famous birthday party there where Frank Sinatra sang. Cuba before Fidel is an ever-present part of the revolution story. Residents often speak of "before the revolution" and "after the revolution." These days they also refer to "before Obama came" and "after Obama came." The President was a welcome sign of hope and many told us they now fear that Trump will set back the progress.

We met so many incredible people whose open smiles and lack of pretense were refreshing. There were artists, musicians, dancers, budding entrepreneurs and religious leaders reviving faith in officially secular Cuba. Many in our group were Jewish and we asked to see a synagogue. A visit to Beth Shalom was arranged within the hour on a Friday afternoon as they were preparing for Sabbath services and a dinner for some 100 congregants. The resident historian told us the history of Jews in Cuba and their mass departure after the revolution. Today, there are perhaps 1,200 Jews in all of Cuba.

We were greeted by the synagogue president Adela Dworkin, who told us a story symbolic of the return of Judaism. The temple building, which had been crumbling, was refurbished with the help of the Joint Distribution Council of New York. Dworkin had long wanted Fidel to come and visit. Then, at a public event, she asked to talk to him. She was given one minute and asked him why he had not visited. "You should invite me to something," he replied.

"How about coming for Hanukkah?" she asked, to which he responded, "What's Hanukkah?" She was running out of time, thought quickly and said, "It's about a revolution."

He came to the service and by the time he arrived he had researched the holiday and gave a long speech about Hanukkah. She said he returned at other times depicted on the synagogue's photo museum wall. There are also treasured pictures of Steven Spielberg who visited and penned a note praising their work. There are four synagogues in Havana but no resident rabbi. A visiting rabbi comes in from outside the country for holidays, weddings and bar mitzvahs.

Cuba, which was predominantly Catholic before the revolution, has many beautiful cathedrals but not enough priests and nuns to keep all of them operating. A visit by Pope John Paul II in 1998 is seen as a turning point for the return of Catholicism. Pope Francis, who visited more recently, is credited with paving the way for the American detente. At beautiful Cathedral Square we encountered a couple taking wedding pictures in all their finery.

Four days after we arrived, the music and dancing came back. Mourning was over. We were treated to four jam sessions with local artists at clubs and one in a private home where all 23 of us squeezed into a tiny aerie where the band played on. We saw two modern dance performances and heard lectures on Cuban arts and music.

On one of our last days, we visited a colorful farmers market filled with produce. But it was empty of patrons. Average Cubans could not afford the high-priced food. We also visited a shopping mall where a supermarket had little on the shelves and stores had an odd assortment

of wares. But amusement rides for kids brought families there. It was also the scene of my most poignant encounter.



I was taking pictures of the mall when a young woman approached me. "American?" she asked. I said yes and that I was from California. We had no common language but she smiled and said, "You American! You my friend!" and she hugged me and kissed me on the cheek. We both had tears in our eyes.

And so I left Cuba with a wish that America would remain a symbol of friendship to these amazing people who live so close but remain a world away.